

# Summary of Research



Montana Fish,  
Wildlife & Parks

## Selected Results From 2007 Surveys of Elk Hunters, Elk Outfitters & Private Landowners Concerning Montana's Elk Population

RMU Research Summary No. 22

Michael S. Lewis, Quentin Kujala, Ron Aasheim, and Joe Weigand

December 2007

Montana's elk population has grown from approximately 55,000 animals in the late 1970's to nearly 150,000 animals today. As a result, many of Montana's hunting districts now exceed population objectives as described in Montana's Elk Management Plan. Being over objective means game damage may occur on privately owned lands and/or there may be more elk than what the habitat can sustain long-term.

While Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) has done a number of things to address this issue (including different hunting season types and combinations), the 2003 Montana Legislature was concerned enough that legislation was passed directing FWP to manage elk in a sustainable manner that does not adversely affect Montana lands. The legislature further directed FWP to consider the concerns of private landowners when determining sustainable numbers.

In 2007, FWP conducted separate surveys of elk hunters, elk outfitters, and private landowners to better understand their perspectives concerning Montana's elk population. Each group was asked identical survey questions addressing the following topic areas:

- *Are there too many elk in the state right now? Along those lines, is there a need for FWP take measures to decrease Montana's elk population?*
- *How acceptable are each of three potential new management actions<sup>1</sup> that could be used by FWP to help reduce elk numbers in hunting districts that exceed elk population objectives?*
- *Lastly, will any of these potential management actions effectively reduce elk numbers in hunting districts that exceed elk population objectives?*

<sup>1</sup> Potential management actions that could be used by FWP to help reduce elk numbers in hunting districts that exceed elk population objectives:

- (1) Implement antlerless only elk hunting in these districts (e.g., antlerless only on general license--no bull hunting allowed).
- (2) Offer unlimited antlerless elk B licenses to non-residents wherever unlimited antlerless elk B licenses are offered to residents in these hunting districts.
- (3) "Earn a bull" ...require hunters to harvest an antlerless elk in these hunting districts before they can legally harvest a bull in these hunting districts.

## RESULTS

### OPINIONS CONCERNING MONTANA'S CURRENT ELK POPULATION

Are there too many elk in Montana? Only 12 percent of the hunters, 18 percent of the outfitters, and 43 percent of the landowners agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement: "*There are too many elk in Montana right now*".

Is there a need for FWP to take action? Twenty-three percent of the hunters, 30 percent of the outfitters, and 50 percent of landowners agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement: "*FWP needs to take measures to decrease Montana's elk population*".

### ACCEPTABILITY OF POTENTIAL ELK MANAGEMENT ACTIONS

Hunters, outfitters, and private landowners differed in their ratings of acceptability for each of three potential management actions that could be used by FWP to help reduce elk numbers in hunting districts that exceed elk population objectives (see Table 1 on the following page).

- Hunters were most accepting of implementing antlerless only hunting in districts that are over objective. This potential management action was rated as acceptable or very acceptable by nearly half of the hunters.
- Outfitters were by far most accepting of offering unlimited elk B licenses to nonresidents. This potential management action was rated as acceptable or very acceptable by two-thirds of the elk outfitters.
- Private landowners were most accepting of "earn a bull". This potential management action was rated as acceptable or very acceptable by 45 percent of the landowners.



**Table 1.** Elk hunter, elk outfitter, and private landowner acceptability ratings for three potential management actions that could be used by FWP to help reduce elk numbers in hunting districts that exceed elk population objectives.

POTENTIAL MANAGEMENT ACTION:	PERCENT responding the action is very unacceptable or unacceptable			PERCENT responding the action acceptable or very acceptable		
	Elk Hunters	Elk Outfitters	Private Landowners	Elk Hunters	Elk Outfitters	Private Landowners
Implement antlerless only elk hunting in these districts (e.g., antlerless only on general license—no bull hunting allowed)	39%	72%	45%	48%	23%	36%
Offer unlimited antlerless elk B licenses to non-residents wherever unlimited antlerless elk B licenses are offered to residents in these hunting districts	54%	24%	41%	33%	66%	39%
“Earn a bull” ...require hunters to harvest an antlerless elk in these hunting districts before they can legally harvest a bull in these districts	38%	47%	32%	44%	38%	45%

## PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF POTENTIAL ELK MANAGEMENT ACTIONS

Hunters, outfitters, and private landowners were also asked whether or not they believe any of these three potential management actions will effectively reduce elk numbers.

- Fifty-three percent of the hunters, 37 percent of the outfitters, and 35 percent of the private landowners think implementing antlerless only hunting in districts that are over objective will effectively reduce elk numbers.
- Forty-five percent of the hunters, 59 percent of the outfitters, and 40 percent of the private landowners think offering unlimited antlerless elk B licenses to nonresidents wherever unlimited antlerless elk B licenses are offered to residents in districts that are over objective will effectively reduce elk numbers.
- Forty-eight percent of the hunters, 38 percent of the outfitters, and 41 percent of the private landowners think that implementing “earn a bull” in districts that are over objective will effectively reduce elk numbers.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

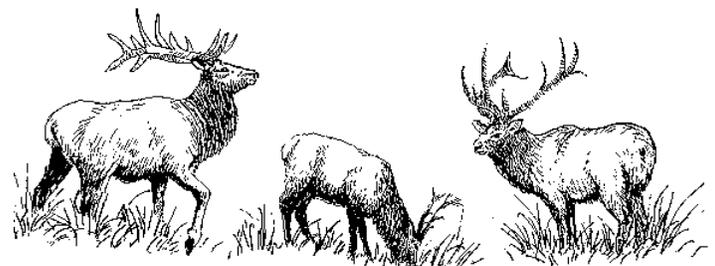
### Elk Hunters:

- Eighty-five percent reported they are current residents of Montana.
- Eight percent reported they are only interested in harvesting antlered elk, and have primarily hunted for antlered elk in the past.
- Forty percent reported they prefer to harvest antlered elk, but have hunted for both antlered and antlerless elk in the past.
- Thirty-eight percent reported they have no preference for harvest, and have hunted for both antlered and antlered elk in the past.

- Thirteen percent reported they prefer to harvest antlerless elk, but have hunted for both antlered and antlerless elk in the past.
- One percent reported they are only interested in harvesting antlerless elk, and have primarily hunted for antlerless elk in the past.

### Elk Outfitters:

- Ninety-six percent reported they are current residents of Montana.
- On average, elk outfitters reported that 44 percent of their clients are interested in harvesting antlered elk only, and will only hunt for antlered elk.
- On average, elk outfitters reported that 36 percent of their clients prefer to harvest antlered elk, but are willing to hunt for both antlered and antlerless elk.
- On average, elk outfitters reported that 11 percent of their clients have no preference for harvest, and are willing to hunt for both antlered and antlerless elk.
- On average, elk outfitters reported that 5 percent of their clients prefer to harvest antlerless elk, but are willing to hunt for both antlered and antlerless elk.
- On average, elk outfitters reported that 4 percent of their clients are interested in harvesting antlerless elk only, and will only hunt for antlerless elk.



Private Landowners:

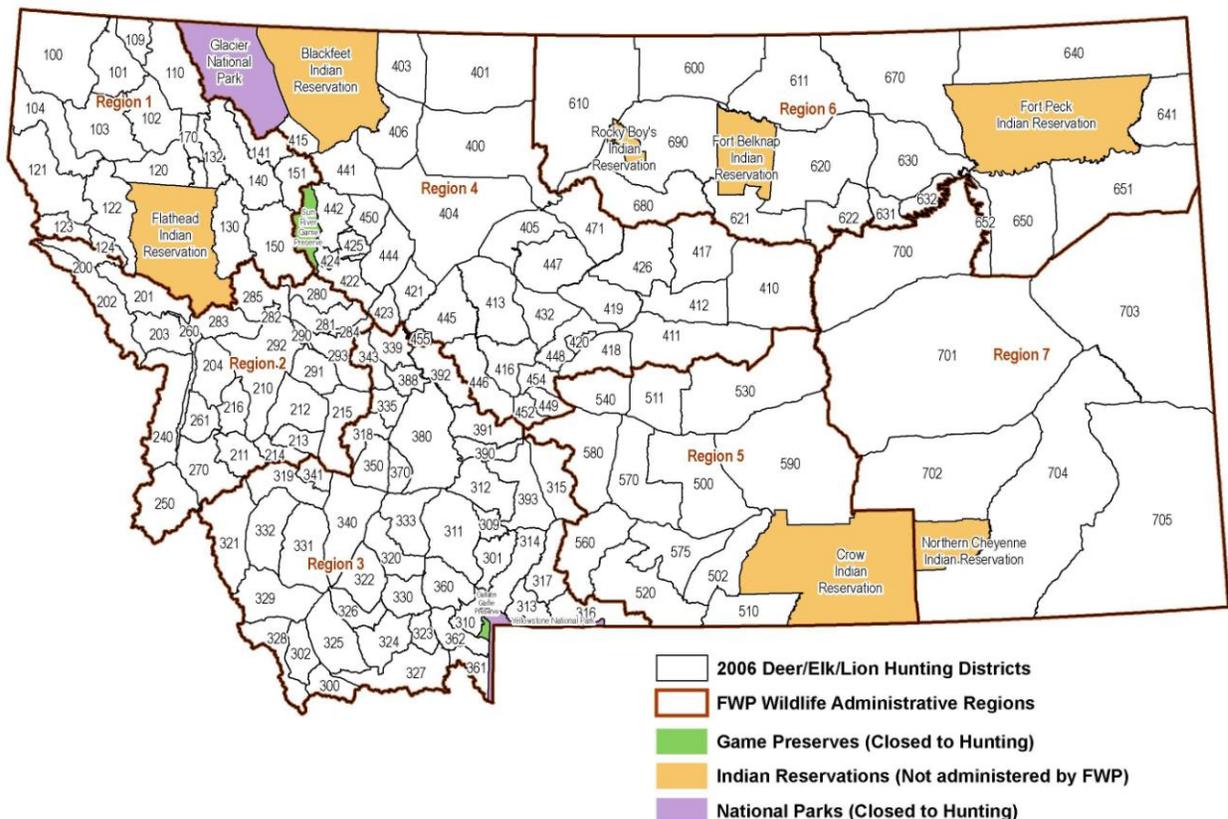
- Eighty-nine percent reported they are current residents of Montana.
- Sixty percent reported there are elk on their property during the general hunting season (late October through November).
- Of those landowners who have elk on their property during the general hunting season, 80 percent reported they provided some type of access for elk hunting on their property in 2006... the remaining information below speaks to these landowners:
  - Eighteen percent provided outfitted/guided hunting access for antlered elk. Thirteen percent provided outfitted/guided hunting access for antlerless elk.
  - Five percent leased property for antlered elk hunting access. Four percent leased property for antlerless elk hunting access.
  - Three percent charged an access fee for hunting antlered elk on non-leased property. Two percent charged an access fee for hunting antlerless elk on non-leased property.
  - Fifteen percent had property enrolled in the Block Management Program for antlered or antlerless elk hunting access.
  - Sixty-four percent provided free access for hunting antlered or antlerless elk.

**Hunters.** Mailback surveys were successfully delivered to a total of 1,490 elk hunters randomly selected from FWP's 2006 hunter harvest survey database. Overall, there were 710 respondents (resulting in a 48 percent response rate for the elk hunter survey).

**Outfitters.** Mailback surveys were successfully delivered to a total of 242 elk outfitters. The list of elk outfitters was compiled and provided to FWP by the Montana Board of Outfitters. Overall, there were 147 respondents (resulting in a 61 percent response rate for the elk outfitter survey).

**Private Landowners.** Mailback surveys were successfully delivered to a total of 3,237 landowners who own 640 acres or greater within 43 Montana hunting districts of most concern in terms of exceeding elk population objectives (see Figure 1 below). Overall, there were 1,737 respondents (resulting in a 54 percent response rate for the private landowner survey).

**Figure 1.** Montana's hunting districts. Districts of most concern in terms of exceeding elk population objectives include: 121, 213, 283, 292, 311, 312, 314, 315, 317, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 330, 360, 362, 390, 393, 411, 412, 416, 417, 421, 422, 423, 446, 511, 530, 560, 575, 580, 590, 621, 622, 631, 632, 680, 690, 700, 702, 704.



## DISCUSSION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is currently challenged to manage the state's elk population in a way that adequately meets the needs of a broad array of constituents, including hunters, outfitters, and private landowners. Among other things, mild winters and increasingly limited hunting access on privately owned lands have contributed to a rise in the elk population in many areas of the state. Even with liberalized hunting seasons and elk harvest statistics showing a slight upward trend (see Chart 1 below), elk numbers in more than half of Montana's hunting districts are over objective according to the state's elk management plan.

Faced with these challenges, FWP surveyed elk hunters, elk outfitters, and private landowners to better understand their opinions concerning Montana's current elk population and to evaluate the acceptability of non-traditional management actions that could be used to help reduce elk numbers in hunting districts that exceed population objectives. While there were significant differences between the three groups regarding the current elk population, only a small percentage of hunters (12 percent) and outfitters (18 percent), and less than half of the landowners (43 percent) think there are too many elk in Montana right now. Furthermore, there was no overwhelming support among the three groups concerning each of the three non-traditional management actions presented in the survey. Management experience portray existing season types, including 5-weeks of general license either sex opportunity with antlerless B licenses, as affording sufficient harvest opportunity IF access to elk is adequate.

The survey effort confirms the value of cooperation among landowners, hunters, and outfitters in the development of elk population objectives and subsequent management efforts.

Such cooperation can be effective only if all concerned parties are present in the discussion.

In the future, the survey results will be provided to the FWP Commission and public as part of the 2008 and 2009 elk season setting process.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael S. Lewis, Human Dimensions Specialist, Responsive Management Unit of FWP, Helena, Montana.

Quentin Kujala, Management Bureau Chief, FWP Wildlife Division, Helena, Montana.

Ron Aasheim, Administration, FWP Communication and Education Division, Helena, Montana.

Joe Weigand, Landowner Wildlife Resource Specialist, FWP Field Services Division, Helena, Montana.

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**Chart 1.** Elk harvest in Montana, 1962- 2005. For decades, FWP has adjusted hunting regulations to increase or decrease cow elk harvest, which results in growing or declining elk herds.

